APPROACHING HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION STRATEGICALLY: THE CASE OF SOMALIA

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APPROACHING HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION STRATEGICALLY: THE CASE OF SOMALIA

Introduction

The U.S.-led military intervention in Somalia, which began in 1992, had profound consequences for how the United States would view later humanitarian operations overseas and the use of military force, in general. The ultimate failure of the international community's intervention in Somalia, and especially the death of 18 Army Rangers in Mogadishu in October 1993, not only forced the end of the intervention, it caused the Clinton administration to be more cautious about future such interventions and less likely to risk American casualties in military operations. Moreover, "lessons" that were either questionable (such as the need to avoid adding ambitious political goals to humanitarian operations – the so-called "mission creep") or outright bogus (the need to prevent U.S. troops from serving under foreign commanders)[1] came to color official U.S. thinking on military interventions. American reluctance to act during the genocide in Rwanda shortly after the end of the Somalia intervention can be attributed in part to the traumatic experience of Somalia, as can the U.S. refusal to take decisive action in Bosnia until 1995.

Given the dramatic and tragic outcome of the Ranger raid in Mogadishu and the influence that the Somalia experience has had on U.S. foreign policy, it is not surprising that a great deal has been written about the humanitarian intervention in Somalia. Much of this analysis has focused on "mission creep" after the U.S. handed over authority for

[1] I call this "lesson" bogus because the Rangers that died in Mogadishu were entirely under U.S. command and were carrying out a mission ordered by U.S. authorities, not by the UN. Moreover, throughout the UN-directed portion of the Somalia intervention, the bulk of U.S. troops, including the Quick Reaction Force, were under U.S. command.

the operation to the UN, the hunt for Mogadishu warlord Mohamed Farah "Aideed" and, of course, the Ranger raid itself.

Relatively little attention has been paid, however, to the original decision to intervene in Somalia with military force. So far, at least, the principal decision-makers have yet to reveal much about their thinking at the time. President Bush, in his memoirs,[2] does not mention the Somalia operation at all. Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, is likewise silent on the matter.[3] General Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time the intervention began, does discuss the Somalia operation, but treats the original decision to intervene almost in passing.[4]

Yet the original decision to intervene overseas with military force is of fundamental importance, because it is at this point that decision-makers formulate the mission's objectives and examine how realistic they are. Here also, decision-makers design a concept for attaining the specified objectives and decide which resources will be required to do so – in other words, it is here that planners define the strategy for the operation. The chosen objectives will define the state of affairs we wish to leave behind when the operation is finished – the so-called "end-state" whose achievement is what we mean by "succeeding" in the operation. The clarity, attainability and appropriateness of the end-state will determine when and under what circumstances we will be able to end our intervention. It, rather than an arbitrarily imposed deadline, really defines what has become to be known as "exit strategy."

In the case of Somalia, the original decision to intervene and the way in which the President and the interagency process made it, had an important effect on the conduct of

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[2] Bush, George and Scowcroft, Brent, A World Restored, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1998.
[3] Baker, James A., The Politics of Diplomacy, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1995.

the mission, the mission's effect on the political-military situation in Somalia and on the later tension with the UN over its conduct of the operation. At the outset, decision-makers incorrectly identified the problem in Somalia as "purely humanitarian" rather than political, although abundant evidence to the contrary was available. Because they misconstrued the problem they faced, decision-makers failed to establish political goals for the operation that were both meaningful and achievable with the resources available – that is, they failed to view the operation strategically.

If decision-makers, starting with President Bush and General Powell, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had correctly perceived the nature of the problem they faced in Somalia, Operation Restore Hope would have looked significantly different – or it may never have happened at all. In future humanitarian interventions, decision-makers may avoid fundamental difficulties by approaching the task strategically, as one would a war. More than the often questionable "lessons" drawn from Operation Restore Hope, and more than any reform of the decision-making process, the principles of Clausewitz' On War can help us to avoid having future interventions end the same way as did our noble experiment in Somalia.

Background to the Intervention

The events in Somalia leading up to the decision to intervene with military force have been well treated elsewhere.[5] Briefly, the American Embassy in Mogadishu found itself in the line of fire between armed opponents of President Siad Barre and troops loyal to him in early January, 1991. Several days later, U.S. Marines and SEALS evacuated the embassy staff and a large number of foreigners. Instead of forming a stable new

[4] Powell, Colin I., My American Journey, Random House, New York, 1995, pp. 564-565.

government, the victorious rebel factions fell to sporadic, sometimes heavy, internecine fighting, a situation that persists to this day in southern Somalia.

Whatever strategic significance Somalia may once have had for the U.S. had evaporated with the end of the Cold War. Moreover, having narrowly avoided the loss of American lives during the evacuation of the Mogadishu embassy, the U.S. government was disinclined to risk them anew through an on-the-ground presence in such an anarchic environment. For the next 18 months, the U.S. government "covered" Somalia by means of a Nairobi-based foreign service officer – a so-called "Somalia watcher"[6] -- and one USAID contractor.

Then in the summer of 1992, a famine, caused in part by continued fighting and lawlessness, became sharply worse in southern Somalia. News of the worsening conditions reached Washington through diplomatic reporting from the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, reports by non-governmental agencies active in Somalia and, increasingly, by newspaper and television journalists reporting from the south of the country. Senators Paul Simon (D-IL) and Nancy Kassenbaum (R-KS) visited Somalia, reported their observations and urged U.S. action. In August 1992, President Bush, reacting to the worsening famine, ordered the U.S. military to mount an airlift of food and medicines into Somalia from Kenya. By late fall, there were persistent reports that, despite the U.S. airlift, the bulk of food aid was being pillaged by warlords. Many voices – in Congress,

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[5] See, for example, Learning from Somalia, Walter Clarke and John Herbst, eds., Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1997, pp. 151-159.

[6] The author.

the mass media[7] and non-governmental organizations –urged firmer U.S. action to end the famine.

The Decision-Making Process

In parallel with the increasing concern voiced outside the executive branch, key U.S. government agencies were rethinking the Somalia problem and slowly coming to the conclusion that a larger and more forceful U.S. military intervention was both feasible and desirable. Mid-November was a critical point in this process.[8] President Bush asked his staff to outline policy choices on Somalia, making it obvious to the various bureaucracies that the issue had top-level attention. A telegram from the U.S. mission to the United Nations emphasized the need to increase UN credibility in peacekeeping. The telegram was consistent with Bush's views and had obvious application to the case of Somalia. Consequently, it increased pressure on the Deputies' Committee (an interagency body composed of the second-ranking officials of relevant agencies, such as State, DoD and CIA), which was by now seized of the Somalia situation, to be more aggressive in its approach to the crisis.

In a November 25 meeting, the Deputies' Committee presented President Bush with three policy options: 1) Provision of U.S. air-power and sea-power in support of a strengthened UN force; 2) Limited U.S. military intervention as a prelude to an expanded UN force; and 3) Full-scale intervention by a U.S. division, plus allies, under UN auspices. To the surprise of the committee, which had formed a consensus around option

[7]Warren Strobel ("The CNN Effect," American Journalism Review, May 1996, pp. 33-37) gives an interesting perspective on the media's role in the Somalia crisis. Based on interviews with U.S. policy-makers and NGO representatives involved with the crisis, Strobel concludes that press coverage of the famine in Somalia, rather than creating U.S. government interest in it (the so-called "CNN effect"), was largely driven by officials' and NGOs' own interest in the crisis and their decisions concerning it

2, Bush selected option 3, the most aggressive approach. In fact, Bush's decision soon became even more forceful, when General Joseph Hoar, the Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), in whose area of responsibility Somalia fell, concluded that the intervention would require two divisions rather than one. President Bush, in announcing the impending U.S. intervention, dubbed "Operation Restore Hope," described it as "purely humanitarian." The mission of the U.S. and coalition forces, he said, was "to create a secure environment in the hardest-hit parts of Somalia so that food can move from ships overland to the people in the countryside now devastated by starvation."[9]

Several points of this summary of the decision-making process deserve emphasis and amplification. First, President Bush himself drove the decision. Bush appears to have been motivated primarily by compassion for starving Somalis, about whose plight he learned from media reports and from diplomatic reporting. In particular, a July 10 message from the U.S. Ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone, entitled "A Day in Hell" and describing conditions in a crowded refugee camp on the Kenya-Somalia border, appears to have been an important spur to his decision to undertake the August airlift.[10] As noted above, Bush's desire to strengthen the UN's credibility in peacekeeping may also have played a role in his thinking. As we have seen, Bush remained active throughout the fall on the Somalia issue, encouraging his staff to develop new options for dealing with the crisis.

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[8] The source of much of the following discussion is Menkhaus and Ortmayer, Key Decisions in the Somalia Intervention, Pew Case Studies in International Affairs, Case 464, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 1995.

[9] "Bush Sends Forces to Help Somalia," Washington Post, December 5, 1992, p. A1.

[10] Oberdorfer, Don, "The Path to Intervention," Washington Post, December 6, 1992, p. A1.

Second, the interagency process worked well. The Deputies' Committee discussed Somalia in numerous meetings throughout the summer and fall. All relevant foreign affairs agencies were represented in these meetings and had ample opportunity to express their views. Moreover, the interagency process produced several reasonable options from which the President could choose. The Deputies' Committee did not slant the decision toward one option or another, the committee sent its decision paper to the President without a committee recommendation and the President chose an option that was not the consensus choice of the committee itself.

Third, non-governmental actors, specifically relief organizations, proved influential in the decision-making process. Although not formally a part of the process, their well-informed lobbying played a role in persuading the U.S. government to act. Moreover, shortly before the President announced the beginning of Operation Restore Hope, a delegation of U.S. non-governmental agency representatives was invited to CENTCOM Headquarters, in Tampa, and asked to comment on the operational plan. Accordingly to Ambassador Robert Oakley, President Bush's special envoy to Somalia during Operation Restore Hope,[11] their suggestions proved useful in identifying the most urgent humanitarian needs and in planning logistical approaches.

Nevertheless, although a number of U.S. government agencies and non-governmental organizations influenced the decision-making process, the plan was essentially a military one -- CENTCOM drafted the operational plan that President Bush ultimately adopted. General Powell makes this clear in his memoirs, "The … CINC

[11] Oakley, Robert and Hirsch, John, Somalia and Operation Restore Hope, U.S. Institute of Peace Press, Washington, DC, 1995, p. 40.

CENTCOM … had readied a contingency mercy mission for Somalia, Operation Restore Hope, which I now laid out for the President." [12]

Moving Ahead in a Political Vacuum

In retrospect, the most interesting and consequential aspect of President Bush's decision to intervene in Somalia lay in the failure to establish realistic political objectives for the mission. As noted earlier, Bush viewed the mission as purely humanitarian in nature, designed only to create a sufficiently secure environment to allow food aid to be distributed successfully. A follow-on operation, led by the UN with substantial U.S. military participation, was to be assigned the political tasks of national reconciliation. A small but experienced "embassy" staff, headed by Ambassador Oakley, lacked a clear political mandate and was largely created to assist the U.S. military in dealing with the warlords.[13]

The absence of political goals is remarkable for several reasons. First, General Powell's own "Powell doctrine" stressed the importance of clear aims, including political goals, for any military operation. Second, it was widely, if vaguely, understood at the time of the decision that it would be difficult for a purely humanitarian operation to succeed in the man-made chaos prevailing in Somalia. Op-ed writers with no specialized knowledge of Somalia and ordinary Americans sending letters to the editors of home-town newspapers voiced essentially the same worry -- what good will it do to feed Somalis for a few weeks or months, then leave them prey to the same warlords as before? General Powell acknowledges in his memoirs that he and the National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, had similar concerns: "Brent Scowcroft's initial uneasiness … was

[12] Powell, *op cit*, pp. 564-565.
[13] Author's recollection and author's discussion with Ambassador Robert Oakley, December 1999.

justified. The famine had been provoked not by the whims of nature but by internal feuding. How were we to get out of Somalia without turning the country back to the same warlords whose rivalries had produced the famine in the first place?"[14] Powell didn't respond to his own question, but the answer was to alter the political-military situation in Somalia enough to leave minimum stability behind when the U.S. military left.

Why did the U.S. not pursue this approach? First, as noted above, the administration intended to leave political questions to the subsequent UN operation, a hope that seems wildly optimistic in retrospect. This illusion may have encouraged decision-makers simply to "assign" tasks they did not wish to undertake themselves to the future UN operation. Second, CENTCOM developed the operational plan for Operation Restore Hope based on military feasibility, without serious attention to political considerations. For example, CENTCOM rejected the proposal of independent relief expert Fred Cuny to bypass Mogadishu port and deliver aid to outlying regions, partly in order to weaken the Mogadishu warlords. Diplomatic reporting from Embassy Nairobi had also repeatedly supported a regional political strategy and a de-emphasis of Mogadishu in the U.S. approach to Somalia (although not in the context of a U.S. military intervention).[15] From a strictly military and logistical point of view, however, centering operations on Mogadishu, with its airport and seaport, made sense.

Third, another influential participant in the Somalia decision, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), argued that U.S. relief operations in Somalia should be free of political considerations. For example, Andrew Natsios, USAID assistant

[14] Powell, *op cit*, pp. 565-566.
[15] Author's recollection.

administrator and the President's special coordinator for Somalia relief, rebuffed a proposal that relatively calm northeastern Somalia should be provided food aid in order to increase its stability. Natsios argued that this would amount to using food aid for political purposes – as indeed it would have.[16]

However, not only the Pentagon and USAID failed to set political goals for the Somalia intervention. There is no indication in the published record that any agency, including the State Department, urged a more political approach. Oakley and Hirsch offer a clue as to why in describing a turning point in the decision to intervene. They report that, on November 21, 1992, General Powell's representative to the Deputies' Committee, Admiral David Jeremiah, "startled the group by saying, 'if you think U.S. forces are needed, we can do the job.'"[17] One State Department official later remarked that "the military 'came forward' after deciding it was a workable mission," and "he was not inclined to question an initiative that surprised and delighted him."[18] Perhaps the representatives of other agencies reacted similarly to the Pentagon's unexpected offer and were likewise disinclined to question the details. Another possible explanation for the inattention to political issues, maintained in the face of widespread unease about the prospect of continuing instability in Somalia, is that Operation Restore Hope was a truly new departure for the United States. Decision-makers in 1992 were simply not accustomed to thinking of humanitarian operations in political terms – although, of course, the concept of doing so was familiar to every American decision-maker from one of the great successes of U.S. foreign policy, the Marshall plan.

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[16] Author's discussion with Natsios, fall 1992.
[17] Oakley and Hirsch, *op cit*, p. 43.
[18] Oberdorfer, *op cit*.

Oakley himself explains the inattention to the political realities of Somalia by the great haste in which Operation Restore Hope was conceived.[19] He points out that the operation was put together in the ten days between the President's decision and the arrival of the first troops in Mogadishu (although, as noted above, contingency planning had begun earlier). CENTCOM's plan, Oakley says, was relatively brief and it left many details to be worked out on the ground. That left little time for agencies to reflect on CENTCOM's plan and, perhaps, question it. Oakley also notes that only a few weeks remained of the Bush administration when the operation began. Bush, therefore, hesitated to commit the country to the sort of longer-term operation that a more politically oriented plan would have necessitated. According to Oakley, Bush was even more reluctant to make a longer-term commitment because he could not consult with Congress, which had just been elected and would not assemble until after Bush had left office.

Finally, Oakley argues that his own professional experience and that of other key figures influenced their views of how Operation Restore Hope should function. Oakley and Lieutenant General Robert Johnston, the commander of U.S. troops in Somalia, had both served in Lebanon. Both were well aware of the damage that could be inflicted by poorly organized militias with primitive weapons. Oakley states also that his experience in Vietnam and that of Johnston's Deputy, (then) Brigadier General Anthony Zinni, determined them both not to engage the U.S. in a civil war, which would have been a risk associated with a more active political approach.

The Price of Ignoring Politics

[19] Author's discussion with Ambassador Robert Oakley, December 1999.

Whatever the reasons for not placing Operation Restore Hope into a framework of sensible political goals, the decision had important effects. First, the failure to establish a minimum of political stability made the "hand-over" to the subsequent UN-led operation more difficult than it might have been, and later led to recriminations over who was at fault for failing to stabilize the political situation. Second, the reluctance to recognize the political nature of the Somalia situation later led to confusion about what the international community's goals in Somalia ought to be, and to criticism of the UN for expanding its operation to include ambitious political objectives – i.e., for succumbing to "mission creep." A more realistic understanding of the situation at the outset would have made clear that the U.S.-led operation itself had unrealistically narrow goals, and might have led to a common understanding of which political objectives were appropriate for both the U.S.-led and UN-led operations.

Third, choosing Mogadishu as the main base of operations, a decision that made sense from both a military and a relief point of view, made the capital more valuable, both politically and financially, to the contending Somali factions. The decision, was, therefore, bound to increase competition and tension between the two principal Mogadishu warlords, Ali "Mahdi" Mohamed and Mohamed Farah "Aideed." Finally, the decision to concentrate efforts on the warring south – understandable from a relief point of view, since the greatest famine was there -- implied a relative neglect of the more peaceful northwestern and northeastern regions, which may have been more fruitful areas in which to begin to restore Somalia's stability. By directing almost all aid to the south,

Operation Restore Hope gave northerners the impression that they were being "punished" for good behavior, while the south was being "rewarded" for bad behavior.[20]

Could it have turned out differently?

Might a different approach have yielded more satisfactory results in Somalia? Perhaps. As we have seen, the heart of the problem was not the bureaucratic decision-making process itself, for it operated in an almost exemplary fashion, allowing all appropriate agencies and others with relevant expertise to have their views heard. Rather, the fault lay in a fundamental misperception by decision-makers of the type of problem they faced. Had decision-makers recognized the fundamental difference between natural disasters and man-made disasters, especially those created by war, their approach might have been different. In essence, Clausewitz' insight that war is essentially a political act must be applied to the latter type of disaster. In that sort of man-made catastrophe, the ultimate goal must be political: i.e., humanitarian intervention must be "waged" with a clear view of the type of peace desired. Moreover, Clausewitz' admonition that:

> "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish …. the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature …. "

must be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to humanitarian operations, as well as to war. To mistake the type of catastrophe is to risk failure in humanitarian intervention, as in war.

The fundamental truth about Somalia in 1992 was that its disastrous condition, including but not limited to the well-publicized famine, was due to a war caused by a number of clan-based militias. For the most part, the men who led these militias owed their standing in society and, increasingly, their wealth, to the war itself. Most Somali

[20] Author's discussion with northern political leaders, 1992-1993.

warlords, therefore, had no interest in peace. To put an end to Somalia's humanitarian catastrophe called for restoring some minimum level of political stability to the country and to weakening the warlords. It was not necessary to restore a centralized Somali state in order to accomplish this, but it was essential to attain a level of stability and security at which some politics other than that of the gun would be possible. Achieving this in a country as troubled and unfamiliar to Americans as Somalia would not amount to "nation-building," but it would be ambitious enough.

If, from the beginning, decision-makers had clearly understood that a rather challenging set of political goals was essential to the success of Operation Restore Hope, the structure and scope of the operation would have had to have been much different. A much larger diplomatic component would have been called for, along with military civil-military affairs specialists (this might have necessitated calling up reserve officers). More Army Special Forces personnel, with expertise in civil-military affairs, might also have been used. Importantly, the operation would have been viewed from the beginning as likely to take considerable time – years rather than months.

Moreover, disarming the warlords in order to weaken them and to allow other, more peaceful forces to emerge would have had to have been considered seriously from the beginning of the operation. Likewise, assistance to the police force might have been an original component of the mission. The police force was one of the few functioning remnants of Somali government. Some police officers, in uniform, had remained at their posts directing traffic for several years, receiving no pay except the odd coins tossed to them by passing motorists. Operation Restore Hope might have tried to nurture this remarkable dedication and professionalism with the aim of restoring at least a minimum

of normal society .[21] In sum, decision-makers would have had to recognize that "mission creep" beyond purely humanitarian objectives was, to a certain degree, both inevitable and essential.

In addition, the operation would probably have been more regional in nature, de-emphasizing Mogadishu in order to weaken the warlords there. The operation would have paid more attention to the more peaceful regions of Somalia, such as the northwest and the northeast, on which the stability of the country might have been rebuilt but which were less in need of emergency relief than was the warring south. Among other things, this would have required a new political approach to the breakaway northwestern region, the "Somaliland Republic."[22]

Of course, faced with such an ambitious undertaking, President Bush might have decided not to intervene at all. Alternatively, he might have chosen one of the other options put to him by the Deputies' Committee, one placing more of the burden on the United Nations from the very beginning. In any case, there is no guarantee that any type of operation would have worked in the case of Somalia. For the United States, as for the international community as a whole, our intervention was a great experiment in a country profoundly different from our own. It is impossible to say with confidence what might have happened had other choices been made.

Looking to the future

Perhaps our misadventure in Somalia will allow us to succeed in similar operations in the future. The later U.S. intervention in Haiti profited from the Somalia

[21] This aspect was added later, with some success, when the operation was already under way.
[22] A political problem that has still not been addressed. See, for example, the New York Times, November 28, 1999, p. A1.

experience. In Haiti, a systematic disarmament effort and support to the local police – lacking or inadequate in Operation Restore Hope -- were important features.

The administration has also attempted to make a more systematic use of the experience of Somalia and other overseas humanitarian disasters. In May 1997, it issued Presidential Decision Directive (PDD) 56, on "Complex Contingency Operations." It calls upon foreign affairs agencies to approach situations such as that of Somalia in 1992 in a systematic and strategic manner. PDD 56 mandates, among other things, that the activities of U.S. government agencies involved in a "complex contingency operation" be governed by a "political-military implementation plan," or "pol-mil plan." According to PDD 56, the pol-mil plan "will include a comprehensive situation assessment, mission statement, agency objectives and desired end-state." The pol-mil plan is intended to compel decision-makers to define the objectives of a complex contingency operation, to formulate a concept for achieving those objectives, to define the roles of various U.S. government agencies in the operation and to identify the resources required to carry out the operation – in short, to define a strategy for the operation.

On its face, PDD 56 is a significant step toward remedying the strategic errors made in conceiving Operation Restore Hope. As with any set of procedures, however, PDD 56 can only work if decision-makers embrace its spirit as well as its literal wording. PDD 56 will make a real contribution if its demand for a pol-mil plan is taken as a spur to think through a problem strategically. If, on the other hand, the plan is treated as a burdensome requirement to be disposed of with minimum effort – as merely a bureaucratic "box to be checked" – its potential will remain largely unrealized. After all, as we have seen, the fundamental problem with Operation Restore Hope was not that

bureaucratic procedure failed or was ignored – on the contrary, the interagency process worked quite well. The real problem was that those who should have known better – notably civilian officials in the Departments of State and Defense -- did not insist that the goals of the operation should be, not simply clear and achievable, but also realistically connected to a desired end-state.

In the final analysis, therefore, the most fundamental lesson to be learned from Operation Restore Hope is different from those usually put forward: not that U.S. troops shouldn't be placed under foreign command, or that humanitarian intervention should not be done, or that missions should not be allowed to "creep" or even that better bureaucratic procedures are needed. The real lesson is that decision-makers must learn to view man-made humanitarian disasters in the same way that they have learned, over time, to view armed conflicts: in the terms laid down almost 200 years ago by Carl von Clausewitz.